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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000920

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PROTESTS - NON-PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION

RIFT WIDENS

REF: TBILISI 911

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: The non-parliamentary opposition's pledge to unblock the road in front of the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) was rescinded, then reinstated and finally implemented early May 14. The back and forth highlighted the now open and obvious rift within the leadership of the non-parliamentary opposition. Nino Burjanadze (Democratic Movement - United Georgia) and her supporters, in a direct challenge to Irakli Alasania (Alliance), managed to keep the road closed at least temporarily; she told the DCM that the "people" in the "cells" had refused to move because this would be a "step backwards." However, later Alasania, apparently backed by Levan Gachechiladze, won the day and moved the "cells" off of the road. Two major TV stations announced they would not cover the corridor of shame that the opposition was forcing GPB journalists to pass through en route to work, expressing solidarity with their fellow journalists. A crowd of about 1000 gathered in front of Parliament May 14, but no other plans were announced. In a meeting with a visiting Council on Foreign Relations delegation, Alasania announced his willingness to enter into a dialogue and drop his calls for Saakashvili's resignation; he expects that the protests and street closures would end by May 26. GoG democracy point man Corrections Minister Dmitri Shashkin told visiting EUR/ACE Director Rosenblum that the Government was waiting for the non-parliamentary opposition to respond to the President's concrete offers of reform, but would move ahead soon with or without them. Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way) accused President Saakashvili of a disinformation campaign, claiming Ambassador Tefft verified as much. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Burjanadze and her supporters appear to be fighting a rear-guard action against Alasania and his efforts to move toward a more moderate position. Privately, Burjanadze has been undercutting Alasania within the non-parliamentary opposition leadership, but the May 14 events represent an open and public challenge. With various leaders publicly exchanging words, contradicting one another, and challenging each other's authority, the deep animosities and rifts among the non-parliamentary group are heating up and approaching a public boiling point. Alasania appears to be walking back from demands of the President's resignation to a more realistic and pragmatic position. However, Burjanadze, who has gambled her political future on the success of these protests, is looking increasingly desperate.

Despite the growing rifts in the non-parliamentary opposition ranks, it appears that the end game may drag on for a while longer. End Comment.

Private Disagreements Become Public

¶3. (C) In a challenge to Alasania's announcement that the non-parliamentary opposition would clear Kostava Street on May 15 (in front of the Georgian Public Broadcaster), Burjanadze led her supporters to the Public Broadcaster and forced Levan Gachechiladze and others to back down, leaving

the cells in place. Alasania responded by telling protesters to respect the non-parliamentary leaders' decisions. Later, Burjanadze told the DCM that she had gone to Kostava Street in response to the "people in the cells" who had refused to leave the street since this would have been a "step backwards." Apparently as a result of a subsequent non-parliamentary opposition meeting, the cells were removed early Friday morning. Burjanadze left the meeting early, Oearly Friday morning. Burjanadze left the meeting early, filmed on tv visibly furious; she refused to speak to the press for the first time in recent memory. A chance meeting in the Marriott lobby between Burjanadze and Alasania (witnessed by PolOff) provided further evidence of the extreme animosity between the two. Burjanadze glaed in disgust when she saw Alasania, who returned the look of contempt. Despite being only three feet apart, the two did not speak to each other.

Plans Still Not Apparent

¶4. (C) The internal disagreements among the non-parliamentary opposition resulted in no further statements about their intentions. The "corridor of shame" will be maintained in front of the Public Broadcasters, and daily meetings will continue to take place at 5pm in front of Parliament, but no other plans have been announced. Providing no further clarity, David Usupashvili (Alliance - Republicans) said that the non-parliamentary opposition had discussed their still-unannounced action plan with a group of experts, who "found it less radical than they expected." Usupashvili did not disclose either the action plan or who constituted the experts. In a show of solidarity with Journalists from the Public Broadcasters, Rustavi 2 and Imedi

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announced that they would no longer report on protests in front of the Public Broadcaster Building. A statement read that "(w)e believe that any type of pressure exerted on journalists and impeding their work, no matter by whom, is unacceptable."

Alasania Takes Another Cautious Step

¶5. (C) Alasania, in comments to a Council on Foreign Relations delegation, said that he hoped the streets would be cleared by May 26 and the process would move to the negotiation table; he looked forward to another session with the government. This position put him squarely at odds with the stated plans of the non-parliamentary opposition. Alasania acknowledged the discrepancy, noting that some elements of the opposition did not believe in negotiation; he admitted that pronouncements on April 9 of unending protests until Saakashvili resigned were a mistake, and he explained that now the opposition just needed to find a way out. In terms of basic demands, he said he would be satisfied with early parliamentary elections and would not insist on early presidential ones. When asked about a possible timeline for parliamentary elections, Alasania said he would not insist on a specific date; the most important thing would be for key reforms to be implemented first, such as a new election code, a new electoral commission, and monitoring of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, so that the elections would be legitimate. Nevertheless, he expected a clear and public commitment from the government to early elections once those reforms were in place.

¶6. (C) When asked whom he was speaking for, Alasania replied the Alliance (as opposed to the whole non-parliamentary opposition). In discussing the events of May 6 at the police station, Alasania called them damaging for the opposition and said they needed to move away from confrontation. Acknowledging that some elements did want to escalate the situation, he said he would distance himself publicly from those elements, if necessary. At this point, however, he thought he could do more good inside the full group. (Comment: Not only the substance, but the forum for

Alasania's comments represents another step away from the rest of the opposition and toward potential compromise. A conversation with a private, non-governmental organization like the Council falls somewhere between a private exchange with the Embassy and a public pronouncement. His new demands largely correspond to what the GoG has said it is willing to offer. The fact that he made clear that he spoke for the Alliance, not the united opposition, suggests that he realizes he is moving away from a position that many opposition leaders will accept. End Comment.)

¶7. (C) During a May 14 meeting with visiting EUR/ACE Coordinator Dan Rosenblum, GoG Democracy Point Man and Corrections Minister Dmitri Shashkin reviewed the concrete offers that the President had put on the table for the opposition, both from within the Parliament and from the non-parliamentary opposition, to consider. He said that the Government had wanted to give the opposition a chance to study the proposals, but planned to begin real discussions as early as this coming weekend. Shashkin said that the plan was for Speaker Bakradze to publicly announce the start of discussions regarding a constitutional commission -- and to see who agreed to come. He fully expected the parliamentary opposition to take part; he was less certain about which non-parliamentary leaders might participate.

It's Left or Right but Not Down the Middle

¶8. (C) MP Peter Mamradze (For a Fair Georgia - Noghaideli's Party) told Poloff that he hoped Alasania's performance on a May 13 episode of the BBC's Hardtalk program, which Mamradze described as utterly embarrassing (and luckily in English, so most Georgians would not see it), would shake some sense into him. Mamradze said that Alasania's position as being for dialogue while calling for Saakashvili's resignation was absurd and simply insulted everybody's intelligence. According to Mamradze, there were only two choices: meaningful political dialogue or street confrontation, and Alasania needed to decide quickly in which camp he resided. Giorgi Targamadze (Christian Democrats) told Poloff they have been sending Alasania the same message. (Embassy Comment: Alasania is no fan of Targamadze, but has a good relationship with CDM MP Nika Laliashvili, who has been trying to get Alasania to the negotiating table. End Comment.) Targamadze said that he understood Alasania's reluctance to break from the non-parliamentary opposition for fear of an all out attack and attempt to destroy his political career. Targamadze (who is held in contempt by most of the non-parliamentary opposition leaders) said that Alasania might as well pursue his own path, since Burjanadze and others would attack him anyway. Targamadze said Alasania

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pursuit of the middle route would ultimately only serve to upset non-parliamentary supporters and supporters of dialogue alike, leaving him unpopular among all voting constituencies.

In Targamadze's opinion, the only rational political choice was to break and pursue dialogue.

Salome Attacks the Ambassador

¶9. (C) Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way) caused a bit of a stir May 14 when she accused the Ambassador of both being duped by and perpetuating Saakashvili's alleged efforts to run a disinformation campaign against her and other opposition leaders. Zourabichvili said that Saakashvili told foreign diplomats that Zourabichvili participated in the recent riot at a women's prison. (Embassy Note: Minister of Corrections and Legal Aid, Dmitri Shashkin told the Ambassador that Zourabichvili and others were caught on MoIA intercepts talking to inmates inside the prison encouraging them to riot. End Note.) Zourabichvili cornered the Ambassador at a recent event, accused Saakashvili of passing him the information, and the Ambassador participating in a disinformation campaign against her. The Ambassador did not

engage an irate Zourabichvili other than to suggest they discuss any issues she had in a more proper, private forum. Zourabichvili declined. The Embassy issued a statement in response refusing to comment on private talks.

TEFFT